

## **Beyond the Brain: Does Individual Identity Extend Beyond Birth and Death?**

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In August 1999 nearly 300 people spent three days at St John's College Cambridge considering whether consciousness extends beyond birth and death. Could such an event been held in 1959? No. In 1969? Most unlikely. In 1979? Well, DAVID LORIMER in opening the Conference reminded us that in 1974, six months after its foundation, the Network mounted an invited conference cautiously but rotundly entitled Ideas on the extension of individual awareness beyond the two ends of earthly life. A public conference in 1989? Possibly. In 1999 not only was such an event held, but the consensus amongst its largely secular audience was that consciousness does indeed so extend.

Dr. PETER FENWICK on the one hand, and DIANE O'CONNELL on the other, illustrated very different ways of developing this theme. Peter gave us a beautifully judged exposition of the evidence (with the promise of more to come) concerning the largely neglected area of the subjective experience of dying, both that of the person who dies and of those with them as they die. Not only are deathbed visions, commonly of visitors who come to comfort and welcome, far from rare, but awareness of such phenomena is sometimes shared amongst all those in the room. He followed this, not with an orthodox questions and answer session, but with an invitation to the audience to speak about their own 'near death' experiences. There followed a trickle turning to a flood of awesome, memorable and difficult to stop accounts of provocative and moving events, most of which chimed convincingly with the data just presented. A good example of the power of orthodox scientific method to illuminate dark areas, provided you have the wit to choose and the courage to pursue the conventionally improper question.

Diane, who also has an orthodox background, is now a renowned professional healer and channeller. She contributed a demonstration rather than an exposition, though supplemented it by an interesting account of her own path and an explanation of channelling (and indeed of healing) as perhaps an extended form of intuition. The content of the material she channelled from an (apparently never incarnated) lama, both spontaneous and in response to audience questions, could perhaps be characterised as hinting at the profound though unoriginal, which is hardly surprising since the deeper we probe the closer we converge. Its form could take explanations other than that of communication with a discarnate entity (as I think Diane would agree), but it is the nature of the experiential that it cannot be contained within a single explanation. Maybe this is where we need the sensitively constructed experiment: Diane complemented by Peter.

The first full day had begun with a typically intelligent and wide-ranging presentation by Dr. MARILYN SCHLITZ, Research Director of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, co-sponsor with the Network of the Conference. She provided an anthropological perspective towards death, and while reminding us that expectation could distort objectivity, noted that what carries conviction is subjective experience, not objective results. So what is 'real' experience? Perhaps material reality is an aspect of a lucid dream from which death awakens us. (And can we wake from it before death?)

Some of her illustrations of birth marks which tally with ancestral misfortunes were taken up by Prof. ERLENDUR HARALDSSON, who provided a detailed analysis of three cases of

children who appear to remember past lives. He made vivid the value of meticulous attention to detail, without which no proper conclusions can be drawn.

Prof. RAVI RAVINDRA as always made spiritual truths seem both sublime and commonplace, in that they are everywhere about us. He emphasised the duality of the self: singular and universal, isolated and unitive. Science seeks (is) knowledge, spirituality transformation, and that requires a 'centred self'. Reincarnation (generally regarded in the East as a punishment) is not the same as being born again. His comments about this distinction contributed to a minor theme running through the conference: what is it that might reincarnate, and what are the practical implications of the various answers to this question.

In the evening we enjoyed a remarkably successful video conferencing session with Prof. CHARLEY TART in Canada. He unfolded for us a remarkable case concerning a NDE during drastic heart and head surgery, during which all bodily functions were not only monitored but brought temporarily to a standstill. It appears that the patient noted the detailed appearance of certain instruments at a time when her EEG was flat, generally regarded as a sign of brain death. His presentation illustrated the value of a single fully documented case study. In no way could this data be dismissed as a mere 'anecdote', as sceptics are wont to call anything other than a randomised trial.

Indeed the next morning provocative anecdotes, here better described as clinical case studies, were set by Dr. ANDREW POWELL within a beautifully crafted and wide-ranging presentation, which itself significantly enhanced their impact. For me this illustrated the ultimate inseparability of form and content, itself reflecting the necessity of duality which, transcended, attains a higher unity. Andrew related Jung's collective unconscious and synchronicity to examples of past life regression and spirit release, showing how the evidence pointed to the primacy of consciousness over matter. Going further, he cited AMRIT GOSWAMI'S work (in particular his *The Self-Aware Universe*) as illustrating how close this view is to the findings of modern physics. Andrew's comments on the place of the shadow within this comprehensive vision I found especially illuminating.

Dr. MICHAEL GROSSO and Prof. DAVID FONTANA share a deep knowledge of psychical research, though both move with professional confidence and expertise within psychology and philosophy. Michael celebrated the convergence of psychical research and transpersonal psychology, and commended to us the use of the will, provocatively for me in relation to diet and fasting contemplation. He noted how easily we can 'fabricate fantasy', and how readily the sceptic will dismiss the whole if part is false. Michael ranged widely, so widely that to follow all the threads would call for another conference, if not another lifetime.

David, on the other hand, after some tantalising remarks concerning recent psychical manifestations, and some penetrating ones about the evolution of consciousness, confined himself to illustrating the broadly convergent map which the esoteric traditions provide of the layout of the after-life. This sort of exercise runs the risk of coming across as overly schematic and conventionally moralistic, a trap he perhaps did not entirely avoid. The effort to translate oneself from one level of the spiritual universe to the next can sound a little like the application required to escape being kept down an extra year in the lower fifth, and sits uneasily with the identity that God is Love.

GESHE NGAWANG is a Tibetan Buddhist monk, who had debated earlier with Ravi about Hindu and Buddhist models of identity, and who later gave a moving description of a deathbed vigil in response to Peter's presentation. He talked to us wisely about the need to understand (in the full sense of that word) the nature of mind if we are to discover that part of it which survives death.

The earlier than expected arrival of new life within my family meant I had to leave during the last morning, after Prof. MARK WOODHOUSE but sadly before Dr. CHRISTINE PAGE'S final presentation and David Lorimer's summing up. Mark links the living expression of his energy monism with its experimental and philosophical substrate in a way which engages and convinces. Vivid and often personal examples of intuitives who 'deliver the goods' were used to illustrate the many dimensions of and filters within that unity which manifests as both energy and consciousness and which is the Cosmos. Like Ravi in another context (or is there only One Context?), he distinguished 'I' from 'me'. Perhaps we cannot find the 'I' because the 'I' is single, and is the universal mind.

I understand that Christine gave a characteristically mobile and vigorous presentation, focusing initially on the exuberance and intuitive insights of the child, which are later so curbed and conditioned. In regression therapy some of the ability of the young to pass from one aspect of reality to another can be regained, greatly to the benefit of our well-being.

David, I'm told, summed up as cogently as ever, illustrating the way in which Christian mysticism and esoteric theology reflect and indeed deepen many of the themes developed at the Conference. He stressed the way in which our preconceptions and previous experience determine in so large measure the way we perceive and interpret evidence.

A Cambridge college is an excellent though not perfect venue for an international conference of this sort. Organisationally things run smoothly, the food is good, the servitors young and attractive, the walks superb, the ambience apposite. On the other hand it is expensive, with uncomfortable seating in Hall, the constrictions on personal exchange and debate inevitable in a conventional lecture theatre, and the opportunities for partying have to be self-generated. Two valuable innovations this year were individual introductions from the platform by the speakers on the first evening, and a 'forum for sharing experiences and insights' each afternoon, when we gathered in small groups to let off steam and grope towards an intersubjective experience.

Overall though this Conference, the third in a continuing series, was not only fun to be at, but from a larger perspective was a remarkable success. Often we do not recognise how fast and how much things are changing. In 1989 the Berlin wall came down, but in 1999 the walls of Valhalla itself are collapsing. More precisely, the glass wall set up by Galilean science between the observer and the observed, the subjective and the objective, conscious experience and 'scientific fact' is crumbling. It is increasingly recognised that the problem with materialistic science is not that it is *wrong*, but that as it stands it is irredeemably *incomplete*. Cambridge 1999 did nothing to discredit orthodox methodology, but the data presented and the experiential and participatory methods we explored went well beyond what is acceptable to the public face of science. In particular, the Conference gave consciousness, which mainstream science does not know how to begin to explain, its proper place at the centre of human and universal experience, and showed that in this sphere as in all others reason and intuition can complement and reinforce each other in

seeking out the path which leads to wisdom, itself that unity of knowledge and love. What a hopeful way to end a Millennium!

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